

The Attraction of the Cross.

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A DISCOURSE

BEFORE THE

AMERICAN BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS  
FOR FOREIGN MISSIONS,

AT THEIR

MEETING AT NORWICH, CONN.,

OCTOBER 6, 1868.

BY

REV. HENRY A. NELSON,

OF LANE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, WALNUT HILLS, OHIO.

BOSTON:

MISSIONARY HOUSE, 33 PEMBERTON SQUARE.

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## DISCOURSE.

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“ And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.”—  
JOHN xii. 32.

IF we had no inspired help to the interpretation of these words of Jesus, we might be in doubt what this lifting up from the earth should mean. But an explanation is given, by the Evangelist, in the following verse: “ This he said, signifying what death he should die.”

The meaning may be made more clear by comparing two other passages, in which the same phraseology occurs.

In one of these (John iii. 14) our Lord, conversing with Nicodemus, says: “ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” He compares the spiritual healing and salvation which human souls receive by believing on him, to the bodily healing and salvation which the Israelites received by *looking* to the brazen serpent. It seems evident that our Lord made allusion to the visible resemblance between the setting up of the serpent of brass upon a pole and the elevation of his body upon the cross. Yet doubtless he would also have us look through this outward and visible resemblance, as through a veil, and see the deeper spiritual

resemblance between that trust in God which would dispose a person mortally wounded by a poisoned tooth or sting, to turn his eye toward that from which God's word had assured him that such a look should bring healing, and that trust in God which enables a soul conscious of guilt to *rely*, for spiritual healing, upon that which, God's word assures him, shall secure that to him.

In the other place (John viii. 28), our Lord is addressing the Jews, and says, "When ye have *lifted up* the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things." He evidently referred to his crucifixion, which he knew was to be brought about by their agency; although his allusion was somewhat enigmatical, and probably not intended to be fully understood, until events should expound it in fulfilling it.

Our Lord did also predict his own crucifixion in express words: "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles, to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify: and the third day he shall rise again."

We are justified, by a comparison of all his sayings, in understanding the "lifting up," of which he spoke so often, to denote his crucifixion — the elevation of his body upon the cross.

At the same time we must understand him to have referred to this, not as a mere visible phenomenon, not as a mere physical fact, but with a vivid apprehension of the moral meaning and the spiritual power of that event. Recollecting this, we may not perhaps be sure



that, in those words, "lifted up," while describing the physical mode of his death, he did not also hint at the exaltation in honor, in spiritual influence, in heavenly dominion, by which his crucifixion was to be followed, which his "obedience unto death, even the death of the cross," was to win.

However this may be, in respect to the meaning of the words "*lifted up*," we certainly have, in this text, a clear expression of the Redeemer's confident expectation of winning, by means of his death, a sublime exaltation in influence and power. It discloses a state of mind in Jesus which cannot be accounted for on any infidel theory — on any but the Christian theory.

Let us try to put aside, for the moment, the views of Christ which we have derived from our study of the Scriptures, in the light which eighteen centuries of Christian history have thrown upon them; and let us go back, in imagination, to the time and the place at which he spoke these remarkable words.

Who is this that speaks so enigmatically of being "lifted up from the earth," and so grandly of "drawing all men to himself?" He is one who came out of Galilee, and who sprang from an obscure family in one of its least reputable villages. He has become quite notorious, both in Galilee and in Judea; has powerfully impressed the people by his discourses, and by wonderful deeds; but the leading men of the nation, the recognized authorities in church and state and schools of learning, despise him as a vulgar impostor, a dangerous deluder of the people. He seems to know that they are plotting his death; and he expects that they will accomplish it. He has even told his friends what form of death he expects to suffer, and has intimated by what complications, and with what treachery, and

in what mode, it will be effected ; also, that it is to be brought about on the public occasion, to attend upon which he and his disciples are “going up to Jerusalem.”

Consider, now, the remarkable fact, that such a man, so circumstanced, with such distinct expectation of soon being put to death ignominiously, not only has this expectation without terror, speaks of it without perturbation, and goes, of his own accord, to the place where it is to occur, without any effort to avoid or prevent it, but evidently contemplates that ignominious death as the sure means of his own wonderful exaltation, and of the fulfillment of his great plans and hopes. The marvel of Jesus' behavior is not diminished when we take into account the popularity which he has acquired. In the context we have a vivid exhibition of this. The people who were gathered from all parts of the land to attend the national festival in Jerusalem, having “heard that Jesus was coming,” “went forth to meet him,” waving the branches of palm-trees, casting them down in the path along which he rode, and hailing him with such shouts as people only utter in honor of their highest rulers or greatest deliverers. Not the most popular of statesmen, or the most illustrious of generals— not Washington, not Napoleon, not David— was ever greeted with popular acclamations more enthusiastic or more expressive of popular confidence. What effect would such demonstrations have had upon the mind of the rustic Galilean if he had been only what he seemed to be, or only what he was understood to be by the people, or even by the most affectionate of his disciples ?

Perhaps some one will remind me of Washington, who might have been a monarch, and who preferred to be a citizen ; or of Garibaldi, who was a dictator,



and voluntarily relinquished his power, and went home to his island, humbly to await the movements of that almighty Providence, whose instrument he felt himself to be. But neither Garibaldi nor Washington had to choose between a position of supreme power, offered by a thankful people, and ignominious death, with the mad consent and approval of the same people. To retire from a scene of public honor, after a distinguished and successful career, bearing the gratitude of a rescued nation, is not the same as to turn away from the opening of a career full of glorious promise, to ignominious death.

Taking the lowest view of the behavior of Jesus, claiming nothing for him but what the simplest view of the facts demands, the manner in which he contemplated the death which was to terminate his earthly career — so prematurely, in any secular view of it — the manner in which he accepted it and went forward to it, is above all comparison with what is recorded of any other historical personage. There was, indeed, one possible interpretation of his behavior, at the time, which would take away all its sublimity. It was the supposition that he was insane. We can conceive of a man having lost his reason, becoming possessed with ideas which would cause him to meet death with composure, while all sane men would perceive that those ideas were utter delusions. It is probable that some men of that time, some of “the wise and prudent,” the learned and distinguished, regarded the behavior of Jesus and his death in just that way.

Eighteen centuries have now passed, and we are looking back, across them, over all the great events, and all the illustrious names, which fill up their wondrous record. As mere students of history, irrespective

of all religious opinions, none can fail to perceive that there is now no one of all those names so illustrious as that of the Galilean whom Pilate crucified. We even give his name to this grand period of history; calling it the Christian era, and dating everything, of which we make record, from his time. Not all mankind do this, it is true. The Chinese do not; the Turks do not; the Africans do not; the majority (in numbers) of mankind do not. But *what* part of the world's population do this? What part of the world's learning, and wealth, and power do they possess? And what are their reasonable prospects for the world's future? Let any one attempt to account for this on any theory of infidelity. In doing so, he will soon perceive how much a fact so simple in statement involves. Nations which did not exist when Jesus was crucified — kingdoms, empires, and republics, — but which now literally rule the world, have their most notable annual holiday in commemoration of his birth, and their weekly holy day in honor of his resurrection. They also date every document, — historical, commercial, or epistolary, — from the beginning of his era.

What gives Jesus this central and dominant position in the world's history? Take away all that Christians believe concerning the *death* of Christ — its significance, its purpose, its efficacy; expunge from Christian literature all that would never have been written if there had been no human souls believing that their eternal salvation is procured by the shedding of his blood; take out of history all that has been achieved under the inspiration of that solemn faith; and what would be left to have made this the *Christian* era?

Let the death of Jesus be only the ending of his life, like any other man's death; make all you will of

the judicial outrage by which it was brought about, and of all the circumstances which distinguished it as an instance of martyrdom, and let it be only that; and would there, could there have been a *Christian era*? Nay, it is what the Christian world believe concerning the death of Jesus, and its relation to their immortal hopes, that has raised all their minds to such exalted views of him. It is what Christianity teaches, and Christians believe, concerning the significance and efficacy of Jesus' crucifixion, that has made it the governing and molding power of these ages. Thereby it has gathered to itself all the resources of the past; is the true conservator of all that is valuable in the present; and obviously furnishes the world its only good hope for the future.

Do you know of anything in history more wonderful than this — that a man of Galilee, a young man, a poor man, of obscure parentage, of no distinguished connections, despised and hated by the great and powerful, and seeing himself about to be put to death, should confidently affirm that his being put to death ignominiously would elevate him to a position of vast and permanent power and influence; — that he should set this forth to his disciples, and to his enemies, and to the judge about to sentence him to death, in language and figures the most magnificent, yet in a manner and style wonderfully calm and sober, the farthest possible from the style and manner of a fanatic?

Yes, it is even more wonderful that we now know those words of Jesus to have been fulfilled. After so many centuries, the most thoughtful men of this generation, and men of all manner of beliefs, look back to him as by far the most eminent personage in all history. However it is to be accounted for, or regarded



as unaccountable, he is universally recognized as the source of the most potent influences now operating upon the world, and still determining the course of its continuing history.

The kingdom of Christ, now existing in this world, the dominion of Christ over those who acknowledge him as their sovereign, who hold his authority superior to any earthly authority whatever, is most wonderful and most glorious. There is no other empire, now existing, or that ever did exist, which can be compared to it. The power of Napoleon, of Charlemagne, of Alexander, or of Cæsar, was utterly insignificant in comparison with that of the crucified "King of the Jews," that king who asserted his royalty before Pilate, and defined it as "not of this world;" and more explicitly defined it, when he said, "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into this world, that I should bear witness unto the TRUTH;" — that king whose servants do not fight, but are commanded to "go into all the world, and proclaim the good news to every creature." This marvelous power, this wide and still widening dominion, were achieved by his dying. It was even by being "lifted up from the earth," by hanging upon a cross, that Jesus won the power to draw all men unto himself.

The greatest power in this world to-day is this religion, which without its doctrine concerning the expiatory death of Jesus, would have but a comparatively feeble hold upon only a small number of minds.

Nay, we think it highly probable, (if it could not be certainly shown,) that the feebler and less decisive hold which it has upon the minds that reject its doctrine of the cross could never have been gained

without that deeper and stronger hold which it has upon the general mind, by means of that doctrine.

The religion of Christ, as it is, with its doctrine of expiation by his death, is steadily, and not slowly, advancing toward the possession and control of the world. It operates as no other power does. It is a kingdom "not of this world," though it is set up in this world. It "cometh not with observation." It does its work silently, in human souls, renovating and purifying them, rectifying their energies, making them sources of good and pure influence. Jesus draws men to himself chiefly by the attraction of his cross. It has come to pass even as he said. We admire his teachings; we revere his character; but it is our believing reception of him, as crucified, which alone brings us into vivifying and purifying *union* with him.

I am speaking to many who feel this to be so; who know it by experience; who are conscious of having felt this attraction of the cross, and of feeling it still. It is to the crucified Saviour that your hearts are drawn. He draws you to his cross rather than to his throne. Does it not seem to you, if ever you shall see him in his exaltation and glory, and be permitted to join with the innumerable throng of his heavenly worshipers, that *your* song will be "to the Lamb that *was slain?*"

Brethren and sisters in Christ: We have come together now, from many, and from some distant homes; from many and widely separated cities, and towns, and rural abodes; from many states of this wide and populous land; and some from missionary stations beyond the sea; crowding this spacious edifice this evening, and all the hospitable homes of this city for some days to come; all for what purpose? drawn together by what attraction? Can this annual convocation, its



large attendance, its unflagging interest, its precious experiences, be adequately explained by referring to the organization and history of the Board whose anniversary is thus celebrated; to the large sums of money which it annually receives and disburses; to the number and character of its missionaries; to the excellent system of its operations; to the geographical and historical and political features and relations of the lands in which its agencies are at work; to the eloquence of those expected to take part in its proceedings; to the romantic adventures, and thrilling incidents, and heroic achievements which may peradventure be reported?

Back of all these, deeper than all these, giving their force to all these, and giving all their reality to most of them, is that power of Christ which became operative in his being "lifted up from the earth" — the attractive power of the cross. Unless we believed in the reality of that power, unless we had felt it, unless we desired all mankind to feel it, why should we thus come together? Take away that from our experience and from our belief, and what would remain to justify this annual assemblage, and the expenditure, and the toil, and the self-denial, and the sacrifice, which it represents? Give up, as a delusion, what we believe concerning the expiatory death of Jesus of Nazareth, what we believe that it has done for us, and can do for all who will accept it, and would anything be left which could sustain and carry forward this enterprise? Is there anything else, in our religious belief, which could have originated it? If the young men who prayed together beneath that historic haystack had not had their hearts touched by the power of the cross, however they might have estimated the human character of Jesus, and his ethical teachings, and his be-

neficient life, can you believe that they would have struggled up, through the agony of thought and prayer, to the height of the solemn purpose personally to evangelize some spot on the other side of the globe? Or, if they had gone, with their burden of care for perishing pagans, and in the solemn composure of that absolute personal consecration which they had attained, to an association of ministers knowing nothing of that power of the cross, not believing in it, holding a Christianity which had let the doctrine of the cross drop out of it, could they have stirred the souls of such men to sympathy with their high and holy endeavor? Surely not, unless it were first given them to be evangelists to them, and to have the Holy Spirit make the Gospel the power of God unto salvation to their souls. Such a work of evangelization never has been undertaken, and never could be sustained, without this peculiar power, the power of the cross. Neither have we any reason to suppose that a gospel without this element, if carried among the heathen, and preached to them never so faithfully, would have any efficacy.

Those who hold Christianity in forms which they call "liberal," and "rational," rejecting the expiatory element as irrational, and the doctrines of depravity and regeneration as illiberal, have not attempted the evangelization of the heathen on any extended scale. They certainly have not furnished any experimental proof of the efficacy of their scheme for that purpose. On the other hand, the experiment has been tried, on a very extensive scale, of preaching the gospel of salvation by the expiatory death of Christ, to communities sunk in the depths of barbarism, debased and polluted with the worst vices of heathenism. This

experiment has had distinguished success. Communities in which there was no good public order, nor any real private virtue, — no civil liberty, no established laws, no security for personal rights; in which there was not one public institution for the relief of suffering or for the diffusion of knowledge, nor one private home adorned with the domestic virtues; in which industry, and fidelity, and veracity were not valued, nor even distinctly conceived; in which an honest man, or a chaste woman, or a peaceful neighborhood, or a happy home, could nowhere be found; — such communities, by no other means than the preaching of this Gospel, have been thoroughly transformed. There are to-day communities, of no inconsiderable extent, to which this dark description could have been truthfully applied, at the beginning of this century, and in which, now, correct moral principles and genuine scriptural piety have become as prevalent as they are here. They have not yet attained so high civilization as our own. This, with us, is a growth of ages. But idolatry is abolished; its laws and usages are annulled; its despotisms are shattered; its sanction of lust and crime is removed; and the liberated and evangelized population is steadily rising in intelligence, in comfort, in true civilization; while numbers of them have experienced that spiritual change which evangelical Christians call regeneration, and are experiencing that spiritual progress which we call sanctification.

There is not a nation or a tribe on the face of the earth, which Christianity without the doctrine of expiation by the death of Jesus has lifted out of the "horrible pit" of heathenism. All that such Christianity has really accomplished, in refining and adorning communities, has been done upon communities



previously evangelized. We would say this not censoriously, nor boastfully, but frankly, and commend the facts to the candid consideration of those friendly persons who think that our Gospel would be improved by eliminating the element in which, we believe, is "the hiding of its power."

But, chiefly, we would bring this truth to bear upon our own minds. We give this opening hour of our missionary convocation to the contemplation of the great central truth, so earnestly affirmed by Paul, to be "the power of God unto salvation;" and so found in our personal experience, and in all our missionary history.

It is in the light of this great central truth, that missionaries and missionary boards, and the churches which they represent, must find their way to the solution of all practical questions in the conduct of the missionary enterprise. In this light we long ago settled the question whether the Gospel should be preached directly to the heathen, or whether they must first be enlightened, and educated, and civilized. "Jesus Christ evidently set forth crucified in the midst of them," has been found able to draw degraded idolaters to himself, and so drawing them, to lift them out of their degradation and misery, as no other power has been found to do. Experience amply confirms the plain view we take of our Master's missionary order. We are to "go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to *every creature*." We are to believe that there is no human being too degraded to receive the Gospel, and be saved by it. We are, before all things else, to show forth the Redeemer "lifted up from the earth," and to trust his power to draw men of whatsoever condition or character unto himself.

Yet, in the actual doing of this, in this extended missionary enterprise, questions have arisen on which we have not always found it easy to be perfectly agreed. How shall we adjust and apportion our various instrumentalities for the most effective accomplishment of our great work? What use, and how much use, shall we make of schools, of the printing-press, of medicine and surgery, of agricultural and mechanical implements, of the discoveries of science, of the arts of civilization? Our answer, in respect to one and all, is this: that they are to be used only so far as we believe, and find by careful experiment, that they can help us exalt our crucified Saviour into the view of the people whom we are sent to evangelize.

If skill to heal the sick and to cure blindness is possessed by the missionary, it is Christ-like to exercise that beneficent power; and winning the grateful confidence of the sufferers by means of it, he gains a precious opportunity to tell them of Him who died to save them. Thus, most directly, does such skill and beneficence promote the missionary's proper and chief work.

If we are evangelizing a literary population, like the Chinese, we can evidently make the press directly and powerfully help us to exhibit Christ to them.

There may be communities in which missionaries cannot gain access to the people in any other way so readily and effectively as by gathering their children into schools, and becoming their educators. These schools must be places of evangelical instruction. They must be controlled by the great aim to make the pupils "see Jesus" — "behold the lamb of God" — look unto Him "lifted up from the earth." They must be watched, and guarded against the tendency to per-



vert them into instrumentalities for secular advantage. They must by all means be kept subservient to the great evangelical aim. In the application of this principle, throughout so broad a field, in so diverse circumstances and conditions, among peoples so various, and by the agency of men so variously endowed and qualified, it is not strange that there have been differences of opinion; and it is evident that there should be broad charity and large liberty. If we prayerfully keep ourselves within the light of our great principle, we shall not be suffered to go far astray, nor be unable to secure practical harmony.

Our missions and our missionary work will not become secularized by availing ourselves of whatsoever auxiliary instrumentalities, with a single eye to this all-controlling aim — to exalt the crucified One in the view of men. But we must always have this for our all-controlling aim, so that we can, without exaggeration, say to any people whom we attempt to evangelize, what Paul said to such a people: "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

It is with the power of this great central truth that all the moving forces of the missionary enterprise must perpetually renew themselves.

In all extended and complicated enterprises, we are in continual danger of being so occupied and engrossed with their details and their instrumentalities, as to lose our vivifying contact with their principles.

An arduous and protracted warfare, for the noblest objects that could inspire courage and endurance, became, at length, a vast and complicated business. It originated new branches of manufacture; changed the courses of trade; determined investments of capital;

gave various employment to labor. Gradually it settled to the level of business, and took the tone and the method of business. Men earned their living in its labors; acquired wealth by its contracts; struggled to make fortunes by its vicissitudes. Not only was the way thus opened for the mercenary and dishonest to exercise and manifest their base dispositions, but even the patriotic were liable to have their noble ardor cooled, and their high purpose enfeebled by the intermingling of lower and less worthy motives. High and pure patriotism could not sustain itself through such protracted warfare, except by frequent and earnest contemplation of the great principles for which it was waged. "The uprising of a great people," to assert, and maintain, and avenge the vital principles of their nationality, and to fulfill their providential mission in behalf of those principles, was doubtless one of the grandest scenes in human history. But it would have lost its sublimity, and sunk to the level of vulgar and brutal combats, unless the minds of the people had been kept under the illumination of those principles. The nation must not lose its consciousness of fighting for truth and for liberty. It must keep a single and steady eye to its righteous aim. It must perpetually renew its apprehension of the truth for which it was agonizing in heroic martyrdom, and perpetually renew its devotion to that truth.

So also must the church militant, moving to the conquest of a world for Immanuel (a warfare of ages), sustain her courage, and her vigor, and her determination, by constant contemplation and vivid apprehension of the truth, to which her Lord came into this world to bear witness — that system of truth which is embodied in him,— of which he could truly say, "I am the truth."

“The Truth, the Life, the Way,” back to God from our dismal and ruinous wandering. Behold “the way, the truth, the life,” embodied in the incarnate “WORD,” — incarnate and dying; “lifted up” in the sight of the sin-poisoned millions, even “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness.”

Does HE need our treasures, the earnings of our labor, the savings of our frugality, the accumulations of our successful commerce? And, *hanging there*, has he not power to draw it from our coffers? Is a paltry half million of our depreciated dollars all we will spend in sending his Gospel to the unevangelized during a year in which we have had one clear view of him thus “lifted up?”

Does HE need our sons and our daughters — the best and goodliest in our seminaries, and colleges, and homes — to go and tell the perishing heathen the story of his dying, that thus he may draw *them* unto himself? And from this land, over all whose hills and valleys so lately, borne on all her winds, sounded the wonderful refrain, “We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more!” — shall it be deemed enough that, to all the heathen world, scarcely so many go as came home in a single one of the most war-worn regiments?

O thou dying Christ, draw us unto thyself, unto thy cross, unto thy pierced feet. Sprinkle thy blood upon us. Swear us with this most solemn sacrament to a new consecration unto the cause for which thou hast given thy blood. In each gathering together of this vast assemblage of thy servants and hand-maidens, manifest thyself, “lifted up from the earth,” and make us feel that power wherewith thou drawest all men unto thyself. And then, when these deliberations and

these communings are finished, and we go forth to our places in thy wide field, let the whole work of this Board, and our various coöperation in it, all be done in view of thy cross.

In our homes, in our parishes, in our schools, in our missions, let the attraction of thy cross be felt so mightily that all men shall see, and feel, and acknowledge that indeed thou art taking unto thyself thy great power, and assuming thy right to reign over the world which thou hast redeemed.







